

What's Wrong with this Picture?

Or...

When do you know you're not doing your very best?

1. When a visitor says: "Sorry to interrupt you."

Learning Point: Our focus as Art Information Specialists should be directed on the visitor. Catching up with your colleagues is normal and understandable--but don't lose site of the real reason you are at the information desk. Should a visitor say this, you may want to reply, "I'm sorry, we're catching up with each other but we are here to assist you--what can I do for you."

2. When the answer to a visitor's question begins with you saying "No."

Learning Point: Even when "no" is the correct answer, it is always better to say it a different way, especially when it provides what could be very useful information. For example, if a visitor asks "Do you have any Michelangelo sculptures?" No is a correct answer. But, you should say something like "(W)e encourage you to visit our sculpture and decorative arts galleries on the ground floor to see the sculpture and other three dimensional work of Michelangelo's contemporaries."

3. When a customer relates a problem and you reply with words other than "I am so sorry."

Learning Point: We all learned the adage "The customer is always right." Heck, we know that is not true, but it is always right, and appropriate, to recognize that the customer feels he or she has a problem. The best way to so recognize this is by offering a "sorry." After, we can deal with the specifics and do our best to first understand the problem, and ascertain what we can (and can not) do to remedy the issue. An appropriate reply can be phrased as such, "I am sorry, but the National Gallery does not permit photography in the temporary exhibits because those works do not belong to us."

4. When you respond to a visitor's question by saying, "I don't know" and nothing more.

Learning Point: After saying I don't know, it is imperative that we attempt to try to find an answer, either through the many desk resources, the computer, or calling one of our colleagues. It is amazing how much our collective wisdom transcends our individual information. Of course, the NGA staff is a prime source of expertise to draw upon. Visitors will also appreciate your efforts in attempting to answer their questions--even if you can not.

5. When you say "I am not sure" but do not follow up with efforts to ensure.

Learning Point: This is actually related to but different than the "I don't know" situation. For example, if a visitor asks where the closest Circulator stop is--and how often does it stop there--we should do more than just say "I am not sure" but here is a pamphlet. We should (again, depending on how busy you are) see if the pamphlet has that information, or we can place a call to the circulator to see if we can get an answer. One of the worst feelings you can have is to guess at an answer, feel better by saying "I am not sure, but I think...", and then, after the visitor leaves do a quick check and find out you were er, um--wrong.

6. When a visitor asks a non-NGA question and we respond by saying, for example, "I am not sure where that exhibit is."

Learning Point: You may recall that when we were interviewed for our volunteer positions, we were asked if we keep abreast of DC events at other museums and venues (and we usually have copies of the Weekend section at our desks). Especially at peak tourist times, visitors believe we are part of the Smithsonian--so we should be prepared to answer basic questions about SI (As well as other questions about popular DC attractions). And, we all should recall that The Castle is the central information venue for

SI questions.

7. When you tell a visitor “The security guard can help you with that.”

Learning Point: When we refer a visitor to another we should ensure that the visitor gets the assistance we assumed he or she would get by our referral.

8. When you tell a visitor “I can not help you”, but do not provide advice as to where help can be found.”

Learning Point: This maybe similar to: “I don’t know” and “I am not sure.” The common point here is that it is our responsibility to do all we can to provide information, or refer the person, or suggest what the visitor can do to get more information. We’ve all gotten that strange question: such as, “While I am in DC, I’d like to see if there is a dealer in antique silver. Do you know where one is?” Again, given time and level of busy--you could check the yellow pages -- and indeed, find that there is a dealer in Old Town Alexandria. Additionally, the yellow “Art Request Form” is still another source for questions pertaining to the NGA.

9. When you ignore a visitor while finishing up with...or continue with...a prior visitor.

Learning Point: The simple phrase” I’ll be with you in a moment” works wonders at just such a moment. Also, if you know that a newly open exhibit is in high demand--and you anticipate being asked, “How do I get to the Cezanne exhibit?” try this: If there is a crowd around the desk, you can respond to one inquiry a little louder (short of a shout, shriek or scream) by giving directions that might be useful to several more congregating around the desk.

10. When you correctly (and proudly) answer a visitor’s question but fail to provide other related and relevant information.

Learning Point: For example, when you are re asked what are the upcoming exhibitions, you are re being accurate and correct if you orally recite them. But, remember: you can advice the visitor that the list in the bi-monthly calendar--and offer it; that they can access information at www.nga.gov; or, they can subscribe to the NGA Newsletter which will provide timely information on upcoming exhibits--and other NGA events and activities.

Stephen A. Klatsky
Art Information Specialist
National Gallery of Art